

SENATOR FRANK R. LAUTENBERG

Opening Statement

Forum on Theft of Motor Vehicles

Newark, New Jersey

May 1, 1991

Welcome Mayor Palmer, all of our distinguished witnesses, and other members of the public.

This forum is designed to address the problem of motor vehicle theft.

Auto theft is a major problem in New Jersey and around the country. For an increasing number of kids and hardened criminals, stealing cars has become a way of life.

Congress should move to expand federal efforts to reduce vehicle thefts. The rate of auto thefts has exploded, costing car owners time and money, increasing insurance rates for all drivers, and threatening others as kids stealing cars take them on wild joy rides and police chases.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, between 1985 and 1989, motor vehicle theft increased by 42 percent, to over 1.5 million offenses per year. Preliminary data indicate that last year the problem increased by another 5%. Around the country, there is one motor vehicle theft every 20 seconds. And the total value of stolen vehicles now exceeds \$8 billion annually.

The auto theft problem is particularly serious in New Jersey. Depending on who you believe, either 5 or 6 of New Jersey's cities are in the top ten in the nation in auto theft. There seems agreement that Newark's problem ranks as number one.

There are many dimensions to the vehicle theft problem. To a large extent, stealing cars has developed into a full-fledged industry, run by professionals. Criminal conspirators are stealing cars, sometimes after a buyer gives them an order for a particular part, and selling the parts on the black market. Chop shops are taking in stolen cars, breaking them down, and making large profits. And increasingly, organized rings of criminals are exporting cars abroad, where they may be worth three times more than in the U.S.

In many parts of the country, the problem of auto theft is primarily one of juvenile crime. Children, some not even teenagers, are stealing cars at an appalling rate, and they start young -- sometimes they're barely tall enough to see over the steering wheel. Unfortunately, it doesn't take long for them to become experts, able to enter and steal a car in less than a minute. All too often, they then drive recklessly, and cause death and destruction in the process. Later, even if they are caught and convicted, most are back on the streets before long.

Auto theft not only means the loss of a car for millions of Americans, and injury and death for many who are hit by cars driven by reckless car thieves, it also means higher insurance rates for all New Jersey car owners.

The problem of auto theft is partly an insurance fraud problem. We're going to hear today from an expert who believes that about 30 percent of reported auto thefts are really cases of insurance fraud. Owners are filing false reports to get a windfall from their insurance companies. And who pays? We all do.

Unfortunately, despite the severity of the problem, Congress has paid little attention to auto theft. That needs to change. And I'm going to do what I can to see that it does.

What can we do in Congress about auto theft? Clearly, there's no one magic formula. But I hope to start developing some answers today. Local and state law enforcement agencies have the primary responsibility for auto thefts. But it's also a crime with a clear interstate dimension. So the federal government must help.

Today, I want to explore some ideas. We need to get convicted auto thieves out of the business. Some suggest banning convicted thieves from selling auto parts or otherwise participating in an vehicle-related business. If convicted thieves are not in prison, they should at least be kept out of chop shops.

We might establish nationally a program first developed in New York City to prevent thefts from occurring in the first place. This program, which the State of New Jersey has since adopted, allows law enforcement officials to stop cars, with the

consent of owners, if they are being driven under certain conditions, such as during certain late-night hours.

Statistics indicate that this program can be very effective in reducing vehicle thefts. It could make sense to make this a national program, by having the Attorney General develop uniform decal designs and consent forms. This could get more vehicle owners involved, and help law enforcement officials crack down on cars that are driven across state or city lines.

We also need to take a close look at the federal law that requires marking identification numbers on certain parts of selected automobiles. Law enforcement officials tell me that this law can be helpful in investigating vehicle theft cases, but that the law needs to be expanded to cover more cars and other types of vehicles, such as light trucks, four-by-fours, and motorcycles. Others disagree. I want to discuss this matter with some of our witnesses today.

Another suggestion from law enforcement experts is to improve the training of police in taking stolen car reports. It may be that by asking more, and better questions, more of those who file false reports can be caught.

I believe that much of the responsibility for reducing theft lies with auto manufacturers. Something is wrong when a 12 year old can break into a car and use a simple tool to get access to a car's ignition system. I'm told that there are ways to manufacture vehicles that would make this more difficult. This is something that manufacturers should be focusing on.

Finally, we need to educate the public about auto theft and the steps vehicle owners can take to reduce their risks of theft. Despite the dramatic statistics, the severity of this problem may not be fully appreciated. Greater awareness can make a real difference. By encouraging people to make their cars more theft-resistant. And by encouraging them to report thefts to the police.

Today we have a distinguished panel of witnesses to help us get a better understanding of the auto theft problem, and what can be done about it.

We will start with Mayor Douglas Palmer of Trenton, who will tell us about his city's efforts to reduce theft, including Trenton's "consent-to-stop" program. Later, we will hear from a panel of law enforcement experts, and will be joined by Mayor Sharpe James of Newark.

I thank all of our witnesses for coming today, and I would ask them to begin, if they choose, with a short statement outlining their views on the problem, and any suggestions they might have, and then we'll get into some questions and answers.

Mayor Palmer?